**BOOK REVIEW**

**Key Questions in Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives**, by John T. Smith, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, 188 pp.

Each chapter of John T. Smith’s book tackles one of twelve key questions about ‘the nature of childhood and on the comparative responsibilities and rights of parents, politicians and teachers to nurture young people’ (p. xi). Each question is framed both historically and contextually, with many generating as much heated debate today as they did in the past. The book covers a broad range of topics from the contested nature of childhood in chapter one to what schools might be like in the future in chapter twelve. This book is of particular relevance to trainee teachers, however, as Smith points out, it is also of equal importance to ‘the general reader, the parent and indeed anyone who might wish to hold schools and politicians to account’ (p. xii). The following review gives a brief commentary on each chapter ending with a summary of why the book is an essential read.

In chapter one Smith interrogates the ‘death of childhood’, including issues of technology and its impact on children’s lives, the concept of a ‘good childhood’ and the social construction of children as either ‘inherently wicked or inherently innocent’ (p. 8). In the final section Smith invites the reader to consider an alternative view of childhood, one which is created by the child through play, investigation and questioning.

Chapter two investigates the purpose of schooling from medieval society to the present day. He explores concepts of instrumentalism, education as a means to promote socio-economic growth, verses non-instrumentalism, the ‘intrinsic value of education for the individual child’ (p.18). The chapter starts and ends with reference to the government school strategy, ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ (DfES, 2003), challenging the reader to consider the ‘enjoyment of learning to be a destination rather than a vehicle’ (p. 29).

In chapter three Smith sets out the arguments for and against state involvement in education. He deliversIn the second section Smith delivers a compelling historical overview demonstrating how the government has taken an increasingly active role in education provision over the last 150 years. In his final analysis, Smith assesses the impact of state involvement in education on children and teachers, leaving the reader to reflect on the view of David Bell (2015), Chief Inspector of Schools, that we need to pay more attention to those who work with children rather than politicians and civil servants.

Chapter four examines the issue of religion in school, as Smith points out, one of the most contentious and hotly debated topics in the UK educational system. He explores the origin of religious schools, the teaching of religion and collective worship. Smith investigates contemporary controversies, such as, the ‘Birmingham Trojan Horse’ and Michael Gove’s (then Education Secretary) concerns over hard-line Muslim governors in July 2014.

Chapter five addresses the thorny issue of why children misbehave. Smith examines both the nature of behaviour and the historical use of physical punishment. In the final section Smith debates the causes of misbehaviour analysing in turn how children, modern society, parents and teachers have all been held to account.

Chapter six explores how children are taught, starting with an examination of King’s (1993) two teacher types, the ‘sage on a stage’ and the ‘guide on the side’ (p. 79). Smith investigates how child centred learning has emerged from a history of didactic teaching methods and explores the tensions between teacher autonomy vs government/Ofsted interference.

Chapter seven investigates the gender gap and the underachievement of both girls and boys. Smith challenges the simplicity of the current debate by pointing out that the ‘achievement gaps within gender groups are larger than those between boys and girls’ (p.108) He leaves the reader to reflect on why underachieving girls are being ignored, raising the question whether there continues to be a bias towards males in society.

Chapter eight examines the origins of citizenship and why it has become so contentious within the national curriculum. Smith explores to what extent citizenship has been used to enhance harmony and moral order within society and reflects on recent fears that the teaching of British Values may ‘become the vehicle for the purveying of nationalistic views’ (p. 123).

The question debated in chapter nine is equally contentious, exploring whether Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) should be taught in schools. Smith examines the government’s failure in the last few years to make SRE compulsory for children aged seven and above in school. He leaves the reader to reflect on the warning by Nicky Morgan (2015), then Education Secretary, who concluded after recent revelations of sex abuse that ‘the stakes are too high to let young children leave school without this knowledge’ (p. 143).

Chapter ten explores ‘whose responsibility it is to feed all children and whether it should be a proper area for government intervention at all’ (p. 158). Smith questions whether providing school meals undermines parental responsibility or whether the cost of free school meals is impractical for the government to sustain.

In chapter eleven Smith presents a fascinating analysis of whether teaching has ever been profession. The paradox between the professionalization of teaching and increasing government accountability is examined with reference to the introduction of a National Curriculum, Ofsted inspections, performance indicators and Teacher Standards. The reader is challenged to consider to what extent teachers’ behaviour is influenced by ‘panoptic performativity’ (Perryman, 2006), the ‘sense of being perpetually under surveillance.’

In the final chapter Smith explores to what extent schools need to embrace developments in technology and a new generation of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001). The necessity for physical school buildings and teachers is brought into question. In the final section Smith makes a case for the continuation of the teacher role, arguing they are more than a ‘….conduit for information. They are motivators, encouragers, critical experts on how to read text and discern the reliability of data’ (p.188).

As Smith states at the beginning of the book, ‘Key Questions in Education’ is an essential read for anyone interested in education. I strongly support Smith’s view for the following reasons. Firstly, it presents a multi layered approach to examining crucial questions about what, how and why we teach, drawing on historical and political perspectives on the roles of children, teachers, parents and government. Secondly, the reader is integral to the discussion and is invited throughout the book to reflect on key issues and come to their own conclusions. Thirdly, the structure of the book offers flexibility, enabling chapters to be read as standalone components, focusing on specific issues, or as a whole, giving an informed and insightful overview of education past and present. Personally, I found this book incredibly informative and thought provoking, as a teacher, senior lecturer of childhood, and someone who is deeply interested in education, I strongly recommend it.

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